

Is there any good news in higher education?

It would seem that the Australian education sector is in the spotlight almost constantly of late. Unfortunately not all of the attention has been positive. Barely a day seems to go by without the performance of our educational institutions and the quality of the education they offer being critiqued and even attacked.

Completely eclipsing any other education related issue is the battering of the reputation of our education system arising from the recent spate of horror stories experienced by international tertiary students. Assaults on public transport, lack of student support, abuse of the skilled migration process, collapsing private institutions, substandard course delivery and the list goes on. All tarnishing the quality of an Australian education, both here and abroad. All detracting from some of the good news.

And there has been good news that unfortunately can't seem to rise above the bad. One particularly bright light on the horizon is the Government initiative to improve access to higher education for young people who otherwise would not contemplate going to university. In June Education Minister Julia Gillard announced new low socio-economic participation targets that Australian universities will have to meet by 2020. The Government expects is that by 2020, 20% of university enrolments will be by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The announcement of the participation quotas has been received with caution and perhaps skepticism by some universities. That's hardly surprising given the vast differences that exist from university to university and state to state.

So how do Australian universities fare and compare when it comes to providing access and equity to disadvantaged students? We posed this question to the publishers of the recently released 2010 edition of *The Good Universities Guide*.

'At present the burden of reaching the target falls heavily upon the shoulders of metropolitan universities' says Davorin Vrdoljak, General Manager for Publishing with *The Good Universities Guide*. 'For example, five of the most elite Australian universities are currently enrolling under 10% of students from a low socio-economic segment. Where as, regional universities enrol on average 25%. This indicates that metropolitan universities have a long way to go in meeting the Government's expectations.'

According to the 2010 *Guide*, there are currently 14 universities above this 20% threshold, although only two are located in metropolitan areas – Victoria University and the University of Western Sydney. The overall national average for participation by students from the low socio-economic backgrounds is currently 15.7%.

'The regional universities are really taking the lead on this one' says Davorin Vrdoljak, 'In fact the top three institutions for enrolling from low socio-economic background as are actually CQUniversity, University of Tasmania and the University of Southern Queensland. It will be interesting to see how quickly Australian universities are able to respond to the Government's call for an increased focus on access and equity.'

Queensland metropolitan highlights: Queensland universities 'share the honours'

When it comes to strengthening participation rates for disadvantaged students, much work is required by metropolitan universities. For Queensland, however, the story is more positive than for most other capital city rivals. The *Access by Equity* rating, a measure of the proportion of commencing students from the six key equity groups, (low socio-economic status being one) rates each Queensland metropolitan university at or above the national average. By contrast, the universities of Melbourne and Sydney each rated 2 stars in the same category. The enrolment of Indigenous students rating also compared very well against the rest of the country with ACU achieving 5 stars, Griffith and QUT, 4 stars respectively. Whilst UQ may be less accessible to students entering with TAFE qualifications, the number of female students enrolled in traditionally male dominated fields of study generally adds weight to the argument that higher education in metropolitan Queensland is comparatively accessible and equitable.

However, there are many aspects to choosing a university, undoubtedly different for each students wanting to obtain a bachelor degree. Traditional measures of university status, such as research output and staff qualifications put metropolitan Queensland in good stead. Griffith, QUT and UQ all maintained their excellent ratings in attracting Research Grants and all are above national average when research income is seen on a per research staff member basis.

Research may not be high on the ACU agenda, but it has well qualified staff and a 4 star student-staff ratio. UQ scored a perfect 5. Interestingly, even though the staff are well qualified and for two of the universities, their student-staff ratios are very good, students did not seem, overall, to be enamoured by the quality of the teaching. At the individual field of study level, students in Languages and also Mathematics were very positive about the teaching quality, and at UQ, students in Architecture, Creative arts, Education and training, Nursing, Pharmacy and Psychology felt similarly.

“Student outcomes in metropolitan Queensland are very bright,” says Richard Evered, Ratings Manager at the *Guides*. “In terms of employment QUT leads the way (5 stars), followed by UQ (4 stars) with all graduates in Economics at ACU, in Pharmacy and Veterinary science at UQ and in Rehabilitation and Surveying at QUT all securing full-time employment” he added.

“Historically, salaries in Queensland tend to be lower than in other states and this is borne out to some extent by our data” explained Richard Evered. The highest salaries were commanded by students in Accounting at ACU, in Nursing and Tourism from Griffith, in Engineering, Pharmacy and Creative Arts from UQ and Rehabilitation, Built environment, Sciences, Sport and leisure and Architecture at QUT.

“Our advice, as always is although star ratings do provide good broad indications of quality at universities, but the detail always reveals the real story”

	ACU	Griffith	QUT	UQ
Access by Equity	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Indigenous Participation	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★
Proportion Given Credit for TAFE Studies	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★
Gender Balance	★	★★	★★	★★★★
Research Grants	★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Research Intensity	★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Staff Qualifications	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Student-staff ratio	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★
Teaching Quality	★★★	N/A	★	★★
Getting a full-time Job	★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★
Graduate salaries	★★★	★★	★★★★	★★
Positive Outcomes	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
International enrolments	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★

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